

T H E
L O U N G E R.

[N^o LXXIII.]

Saturday, June 24. 1786.

AMIDST the various branches of the Fine Arts in which Ancient Greece excelled, there seems to be none in which her pre-eminence stands more undisputed than that of *Sculpture*. In Music she was far distant from any perfection; and indeed it is in modern times only that this art has received its highest improvements. In Painting, too, whatever we may be told of the high admiration in which a Zeuxis and an Apelles were held by their countrymen, yet there is very good reason to believe that the moderns have far exceeded the ancients in this beautiful art. In Poetry, though we shall not presume to say that other nations have gone beyond the Greeks; yet surely it must be allowed, that the Roman poets, as well as those of modern times, approach so near the Grecian models, as to suffer very little from the comparison. But in Sculpture the Greeks stand confessedly unrivalled, as having attained the summit of perfection. All the productions, not only of modern, but even of Roman Sculpture, are acknowledged to be inferior to those perfect and finished models which Greece produced. In short, however much the partisans of modern times may be inclined to dispute the palm with the ancients in others of the Fine Arts, yet in that of Sculpture all seem to concur in confessing the superiority of the Grecian artists. And I think their arriving at such excellence in this art may be accounted for from very obvious and satisfactory causes.

Sculpture or Statuary is one of the imitative arts which mankind would very early practise; and accordingly there are few, even of the most uncultivated nations, among whom we do not find some rude attempts to form images in wood or in stone, if not in metal. To represent with any correctness and accuracy, a solid figure upon a plain surface, would not so readily occur, as the idea of forming the resemblance of a man, or any other animal, in stone or marble. Painting, therefore, is of later invention than Statuary; and being an art of much greater difficulty, would consequently be much slower of coming to any considerable degree of perfection. To acquire

quire the art of properly distributing light and shade, so as to make the several figures stand out from the canvas; to possess the power of animating those figures with the most natural and glowing colours; to throw them into groupes of a pleasing form; to preserve that perfect proportion of size and distance which perspective demands; are those excellencies of painting which it has required the efforts and the experience of many successive ages to attain. To form a finished statue is neither so complex nor so difficult an art. To be able, by means of the chisel, to bring the rude block of marble to present the exact resemblance of the most graceful human form, is no doubt a surprising and beautiful effort of industry and genius; and it would require a considerable time before such an art could attain perfection; but that perfection being obviously much more easily attainable than any excellence in painting, so it would necessarily be much sooner acquired. As more readily to be acquired, it would naturally be more generally practised; and this circumstance again would, in its turn, accelerate the progress of the art.

The athletic exercises of the Greeks, joined to the natural beauty of the human form, for which their country and climate were distinguished, furnished ready models for Sculpture. To Painting they afforded much less assistance. The mere muscular exertions of the body are favourite objects of imitation for the Statuary, and from the successful copy he acquires the very highest degree of renown. Painting draws its best subjects from other sources; from the combination of figures, from the features of emotion, from the eye of passion. Groupes in sculpture (if we except works in *relief*, which are much less distinct and striking than pictures) are perhaps too near nature to be pleasing. It is certainly true, as a most ingenious and excellent philosopher has observed, that we are not pleased with imitation when she presses too close upon reality: A coloured statue is offensive; and the wax-work figures of Mrs *Wright*, which she dresses in the habits of the times, and places in various attitudes in different parts of the room, excite surprise indeed, but never produce delight. Sculpture, therefore, thus confined to single figures, seems little less inferior to Painting, than was the ode recited by one person at the feast of *Bacchus*, to the perfect drama of *Sophocles* and *Euripides*.

When Statuary reached its highest excellence in Greece, the art of Painting had made but a slender progress. The admiration of the works which their painters produced, seems to have proceeded more from

from a sense of the great difficulty of the art, and from surprise, therefore, at seeing any tolerable production, than from the pictures truly meriting the praises that we find bestowed upon them. To the eye of taste, the work of the Statuary was the more complete and finished production; the art was accordingly more generally cultivated; and by the authors of antiquity the statues of Greece are more frequently mentioned than their paintings, are spoken of, and dwelt upon in such terms as sufficiently show them to have been considered as the superior and more admirable exertions of the taste and genius of that elegant people.

If we admit these circumstances to account for the very high degree of perfection which Grecian Sculpture attained, it will not be very difficult to explain why they have never been surpassed, and why the art itself has ever since declined. When any art has received a very high, or perhaps its utmost degree of perfection, this circumstance of itself necessarily destroys that noble emulation which alone can stimulate to excellence. Conscious of being unable to surpass the great models which he sees, the artist is discouraged from making attempts. The posts of honour are already occupied; superior praise and glory are not to be reached; and the ardour of the artist is checked by perceiving that he cannot exceed, and that, after all his efforts, he will not be able perhaps to equal, the productions of those masters which have already the advantage of an established reputation.

It is for these reasons, as has been justly observed, that when the arts and sciences come to perfection in any state, they from that moment naturally and necessarily decline; and if this be the case, then surely the more perfect degree of excellence any art has attained, the more certain must be its after decay. We may indeed carry the observation somewhat farther, and affirm, that if the art has arrived at the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable in any age, or in any situation, that art will not only naturally decline amongst the people where it so flourished, but that this circumstance will prevent its ever being again brought to any considerable pitch of improvement amongst any other people, while the first perfect models remain. The excellence of Homer, whatever might be its effects on his own countrymen, did not repress the genius of Virgil, or of Lucretius; nor did the reputation of these great poets of antiquity check the ardour of Tasso, or of Milton. But the difference of language, the infinite choice of subjects, and the variety of powers which Poetry can employ, prevent the eminence of a
poet

poet in one country from having much effect in damping the efforts of the poets in another. With regard to Sculpture, however, the case is widely different. No diversity of subjects, no variety of powers to exert, no difference in the mode of expressing his conceptions, fall to the share of a Statuary. A correct representation of the exterior human form, marked perhaps with some of the stronger expressions of the countenance, the chusing a graceful or a striking figure, the throwing it into a pleasing or an interesting attitude, and the finishing the whole production with the most nice and exquisite workmanship, constitute the utmost limits of the Sculptor's art. When the highest excellence in these, therefore, has been attained, and while those perfect models remain, they must ever after repress emulation in the art, and crush all the efforts of genius.

Together with this general cause, there is another which has very much contributed to the decline of the art of Sculpture in modern times, and that is, the great improvements, and the extraordinary pitch of excellence which Painting attained soon after the revival of arts and letters in Europe. This had naturally the effect of directing the attention of all ingenious artists to cultivate the art of Painting, where glory and praise were sure to be acquired, rather than to Statuary, where no laurels were to be won. The models of ancient Statuary held the place of nature to the study and imitation of the great artists of that time : But imitative ingenuity and ambition had no room in working on marble, after marbles already perfect. To translate them (if I may be allowed the expression) into Painting, was an object that gave emulation scope; and in fact it happened that the chissel of the Greeks was the great guide of the Roman pencil. Not only the novelty of the art of Painting, in consequence of the improvements it had received, but also the greater field which it afforded for the exertions of genius, contributed to render it the great object of attention. The more perfect representation it exhibited of the human form, by the aid of colouring, the variety of figures which it admitted of being introduced, and the opportunity it presented of interesting and engaging the passions of the beholder, were all circumstances which naturally concurred to make it be held the more favoured and estimable display of an artist's power.

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